

The voice of British and Irish Unitarians and Free Christians Issue 7956 9 February 2019



Our story is
killing us

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Why religion matters now



Polar bears already face shorter ice seasons – limiting prime hunting and breeding opportunities. Polar bears can't outswim their prey, so they perch on the ice and ambush seals at breathing holes or break through the ice to access their dens. The total number of ice-covered days declined at the rate of seven to 19 days per decade between 1979 and 2014. NASA photo

By Bob Janis-Dillon

About 200 years ago, in Northern England, a group of intelligent primates developed the means of mass production. This was a colossal change for life on earth.

It wasn't the first time animals had manipulated their environment. Apes, chimpanzees, crows, beavers, octopi and many other creatures had been using tools for millions of years. Human beings, from *Homo erectus* to *Homo sapiens*, took this ingenuity to another level: controlling fire; forging weapons out of bronze and steel; and inventing agriculture and herding.

Throughout our history, human success has come at an environmental cost. Ancient forests were chopped down, the quality of the soil changed, and whole species died out. Scientists now strongly suspect, based on analysis of soil and fossil records, that this trail of devastation has been a part of the human story wherever we went, the aboriginal populations as well as the modern empire-states. The global empires were just more effective, and much quicker, at annihilating their opposition, and bending the environment to their will.

10,000 iPhones a day

Even though the use of tools was not new to us – nor was our destructiveness – life on earth changed profoundly in the 19th century. This was because this inventive species of primates made their already-well-developed powers of toolmaking *scalable*. A skilled medieval blacksmith, with the help of a forge, could make a metal item in hours or days. Over the course of his lifetime, he could keep a small village supplied with weapons and tools. Today, and every day at Foxconn's factory in Shenzhen, 10,000 new iPhones will come off the assembly line. And an iPhone is a great deal more complicated than a blacksmith's sword.

What allowed us to make the jump from fishhooks and

axes to iPhones, automobiles and atom bombs? It sure wasn't prayer. The industrial revolution harnessed our species' creative talents to an almost unstoppable engine: science and the scientific method. The industrial revolution used numbers and measurement, input and output, hypothesis and result, to turn one axe per day into two, then four, then eighty-eight. With science, we were able to transmute electricity into machine movement, algorithms and coltan into processing speed, fossilised dinosaur remains into fuel for cars and airplanes. Thanks to science, we live longer lives, have uninterrupted access to light and warmth, travel hundreds of miles easily, and look at photographs of the Martian landscape. It is an amazing world we live in today.

8 million tons of plastic every year

If the upsides of the industrial revolution are obvious, the dangers are increasingly becoming obvious as well. Humanity is on course to wipe out 30 to 50 percent of the earth's species by 2050. We have already modified about half the land surface of the earth; we dump 8 million tonnes of plastic into the oceans every year; over the last five years the global temperature has increased by almost half a degree, as it also did the 30 years before that – changes that take millennia under normal circumstances, even in a planet of shifting temperatures like ours.

At the beginning of the industrial age, it was generally argued that the globe was much too big, and God too much in control, for us little humans to make a significant change. Many claimed we would be unlikely to ever be able to *explore* the great big world, much less conquer it! The world would remain mostly wilderness – and as for the small fraction of the world we cultivated, it was given to us by God to make our own lives productive and comfortable.

(Continued on next page)

Our species needs people of faith

(Continued from previous page)

This idea, understandable from the perspective of its age, was terribly, terribly wrong. The mystery of God may be infinite, but the natural resources of the earth are not. If past results are any indication of future performance, we will find ingenious ways to use more and more of the earth's resources, until our global ecosystem is exhausted and the earth is uninhabitable to us. We are very clever monkeys, awkwardly brilliant in our pursuit of what every mammal wants (status, good food, sex, comfort, beauty, etc.). But we are not immortal.

If, at the dawn of the Age of Enlightenment, you had asked a reasonable person what would be the cause of most of the world's problems over the next several hundred years, 'religion' would have been the safest bet, by far. Western Europe had suffered centuries of bloodshed as the various Protestant and Catholic armies battled it out, ostensibly over theological matters such as whether predestination was absolute, and whether the presence of Christ in the Eucharist was literal or symbolic.

Faith gave humans dominion

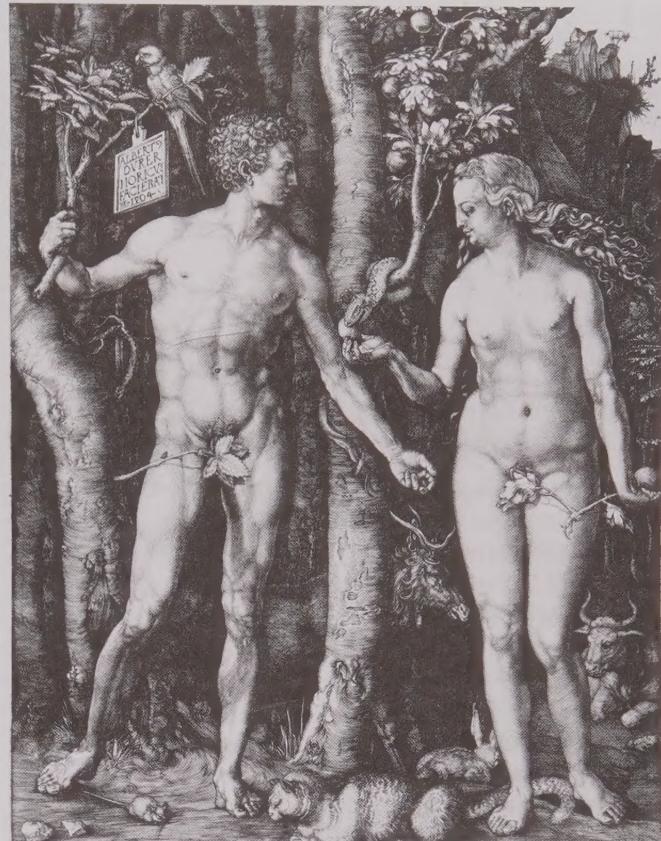
Enlightenment, in fact, did not curb the follies of religion, and some of the worst aspects of religion have been in full evidence since, from the evil Biblical justifications of slavery, to the horrible clergy abuse scandals of our day. Samuel Johnson may have said that 'patriotism is the last refuge of the scoundrel', but surely religion is the first, and still most popular, street corner from which the scoundrel might pray loudly in his own defence.

For all this, religion did not cause climate change. It may have contributed, in an ancillary way, by promoting the dangerous idea that God gave us this earth to use and enjoy howsoever we wish. But the real means of us destroying our world was something else: modern science.

While I share some historical sympathies with the Luddites, it is worth pointing out that I am writing this essay on one of my two laptops, both of which I adore. I wouldn't have the faintest idea how to survive in the 16th century. I vaccinate my children and read popular theoretical physics books for fun. As a theologian, I am grateful that science continues to challenge the more inane expostulations of religious dogma. For even if, as creationists argue, scientists have yet to discover every step in the evolution of the human eyeball, the fact remains that evolution is a basic fact of our world. And our knowledge of evolution brings millennia of conversations about theodicy into sharper focus. My children have an innate sense of balance, and the reason is because many other children, and young animals before them, bashed their heads open in terrible accidents. We now know this to be a fact. Heck, we've even seen the DNA strands by which it happens!

Evolution is as cruel as some religions

The awful cruelty of evolution, from a human perspective, is undeniable – but it's not especially more cruel than the notion that God takes some children young, as part of some larger master plan. And perhaps, indeed, evolution is part of some plan beyond our understanding – but we need to be very cautious about being too glib about this. To dismiss the legitimate criticisms of the seemingly heartless layout of natural events is not only facile and theologically lazy; it is mocking and disrespectful to the billions of mothers who



Genesis 1: 26-28 (KJV): 'And God blessed (Adam and Eve), and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth.' Engraving by By Albrecht Dürer

have held a child in their arms. Job was right to berate his theologically savvy friends.

Nevertheless, climate change is a problem caused, not by religion, but by our scientific advances. It is a problem caused by our own cleverness. The Inquisition was far too vacuous to have come up with the means to change the literal composition of the atmosphere. It took far more ingenious people, using science, to make that happen.

Science can bring solutions

Some say while science may have been the cause – or at least a major cause – of climate change (and species extinction, and the destruction of our oceans, etc.) – it must also be the solution. It is of no real use to pray for an answer; scientific problems require scientific solutions.

I agree, up to a point: almost surely, problems of this scale must be addressed by scientific mindsets. We need numbers and trials, hypotheses and results that can be scaled to the millions. Whether it is a bioengineered microbe that eats plastic; careful study of the interrelatedness within a jungle ecosystem; or the social sciences' insights into human behaviour, we need more scientific knowledge, and we need it badly. Smashing all the machines won't save us now (besides, we'd never do it).

Science is part of the solution. But the world also desperately needs religion, today. How can I say that, when I have already admitted how prone to error and hypocrisy, wickedness and wilful ignorance, religion so often is? It is tempting to think that the absence of religion will lead to the presence of good sense.

(Continued on page 6)

The INQUIRER

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all creation; and the upholding of the
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Inquiring Words

Committed to our shared home

Committed to respond to the call of a wounded world...
We join together this day with loving hearts, hands and minds.
Embracing the interconnected web of water, air and earth...
We light a fire of sustaining hope, ever bright with love and justice.
May we bring forth this day new wisdom, strength and courage
To create a new world not of wealth, but well-being.
A world of new peace and abundance for all.
As we give thanks for this earth, our shared and singular home,
May we dedicate ourselves to its ongoing care.
Rising to the calls deep within us, and all around us...
May we respond today and always with courage and with love.

— Lynn Harrison

Earth has all the time in the world

The report on the environment in this issue is, in effect, in two parts. This week, Bob Janis-Dillon makes a powerful argument that religion is one of the reasons that humans have had such terrible effects on planet Earth and the creatures we share it with. In the next issue, Maud Robinson will offer ideas and strategies for what people of faith can do – should do – to heal the Earth. It is a matter of human survival.

Onondaga Nation Chief Oren Lyons, an American Indian I know who has fought both for his people and the environment all of his adult life, says the Earth has all the time in the world. It's humans who don't. He makes the argument, just as Bob does, that the Earth would be much better off without us.

But how does faith fit in? Oren points to two aspects of Christian faith which caused great harm to both his people and the Earth, which he regards as a mother. It's that verse in Genesis, he says, where man was given 'dominion' over the Earth and her creatures. In his way of life – a spiritual tradition grounded in giving thanks – all of the Earth's beings work in harmony. When hunted, animals are thanked for their sacrifice. Plants that come with the turning seasons are celebrated in Longhouse ceremonies.

It was this idea of dominion which fed into the 'Doctrine of Discovery'. That was an assertion by papal bull that land which was inhabited by non-Christians could be seized in the name of God. It was on that basis that the genocide of millions of indigenous people of the Americas was justified.

The doctrine, based the granting of humanity to a person or a people on their religious belief and practices, has had terrible consequences. Today, it is not just an academic matter. The doctrine was used as recently as 2005 in a US Supreme Court decision which found against an Indian Nation's land claim. Chief Lyons has been working for decades to convince the Vatican to reverse the doctrine. And, after many years, a delegation from the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) Confederacy council he sits on met with Pope Francis in 2016. The church is now considering whether to abolish the doctrine.

The doctrine is a long way from our dogma-free Unitarian faith. But we are still inheritors of a tradition of ecological abuse. So, what shall we do, as people of faith, to reverse human damage to our planet? Maud Robinson will tell us in the 23 February *Inquirer*.

— MC Burns

Objections raised to GA keynote

By MC Burns

Some Unitarians have raised objections to the choice of keynote speaker Lord Mark Price – with some planning to protest – when the Tory peer speaks at the Unitarian General Assembly meetings at Birmingham in April. Lord Price, former minister of state for trade and investment, plans to speak on ‘Workplace Happiness: Why Should We Care?’

The Rev Jo James, minister at Mill Hill Unitarian Chapel, Leeds, said, ‘We are in the middle of a serious national crisis brought about by an internal Conservative party factional dispute. The Tory party has been pursuing an agenda which can realistically be described as ultra-right.

Its austerity policies are causing deep distress and real harm that will take generations to heal. Our congregations throughout the country are working to ameliorate the worst effects of these policies and yet in this context and this particular political climate the Annual Meetings Panel have decided that it is appropriate to invite a Conservative Peer to give our keynote lecture.’

Joy Foster, an Aberdare Unitarian is also unhappy. ‘This man was part of a government and belief system that has decimated people’s lives. For him to speak to us about anything would be of no interest to me, but to have the audacity to speak on happiness in the workplace!

‘Whereby people have to get up to three or even four jobs to make ends meet because of zero-hours contracts, to not have a living wage as mandatory, thousands working with no ability to plan their futures not knowing if they will get enough hours to pay their rent – let alone ever having the prospect of a mortgage. And, disabled people are being humiliated, having to go before a panel to decide if they are fit to work, causing untold misery and worry.’

The choice of a keynote speaker is made by the Annual Meetings Panel, appointed by the GA Executive committee. Derek McAuley, chief officer of the GA, said, ‘Over the past year as we moved towards the shorter meetings we have been considering how a higher-profile speaker might bring fresh perspectives.’ The John Relly Beard lecture, sponsored by the Ministerial Fellowship, has been folded in to the keynote address, owing to time constraints. The fellowship did not have a say in the choice of Lord Price.

‘The Annual Meetings Panel has kept in touch with the Ministerial Fellowship over the new arrangements and we agreed that in this first year the panel would be responsible for finding the speaker,’ Derek said. ‘The selection of speakers has, to be honest, never been easy over the years.’

There were several reasons the panel chose Lord Price, Derek said. ‘He is from a nonconformist background and is a former senior leader of the largest employee-owned company in the UK. He has wide experience of business and government and is thinking and writing about the issues of the day, especially in the workplace, drawing upon his long experience at the John Lewis Partnership.

‘Whilst we chose him we should not forget he could easily have said “no” given the other demands on his time.’



Lord Mark Price

‘This moment calls for a deeper conversation’

– Claire MacDonald

See page 9

Derek believes Lord Price will have much to offer to a Unitarian audience. ‘We often say that Unitarianism is more about how we live in this world not in any future one! Finding meaning in the workplace, where so many of us spend

so much of our time, is therefore an important issue. ‘He is also heavily involved in fair trade issues, something that concerns many Unitarians, and which relates to how workers are treated in other parts of the world.’

Paul Lindsay Dawson, a member of the Wakefield congregation, disagrees. ‘Tolerance has boundaries. Do we invite neo Nazis into an open platform? No. Yet we allow a representative of a government that has forced thousands into debt, thousands to rely on food banks.

‘I won’t tolerate the behaviour and actions of someone who supports policies of (whichever) party that results in record homelessness, food bank use, child poverty,’ he said.

Jo said his objections don’t only stem from Lord Price’s politics. ‘Even if we choose to completely ignore the party political aspect (and I reluctantly concede that my political views may not be universally shared), the idea that a religious movement would call the CEO of a supermarket chain to speak on the subject of “Workplace Happiness” as its *keynote lecture* is indicative of a moral vacuousness.’

Some Unitarians suggested on the UK Unitarians facebook page that those who object to Lord Price’s address bring placards or wear badges reading, ‘austerity kills’. Paul encouraged that idea, saying, ‘We must embrace our radicalism once more and man the barricades to stand up for decency, justice, human rights, the marginalised, the oppressed, those forgotten by society and oppose those whose political ideology is an anathema to all decent people. Have we all forgotten that barely 100 years ago, protest got women the right to vote?’

He said, ‘Why is our GA quota payment being used to pay a multimillionaire?’ adding he plans to encourage his congregation to withhold its GA quota payment as a protest.

Derek said the meetings panel discussed objections to Lord Price, and he offered this response: ‘Lord Price has not been invited to speak for the government, but to offer his personal views on an important and relevant topic. We recognise that higher profile speakers are more likely to be more controversial than the “insiders” from our liberal religious world whom we have tended to invite in the past.

‘There will be different views on who should be invited but someone has to make a decision. There will, of course, always be opportunities to ask questions at the session if one disagrees with what the speaker has said.’

MC Burns is editor of *The Inquirer*.

It is no longer enough to live a

(Continued from page 3)

I know so many non-religious people who are smart, funny, kind, justice-seeking, well-balanced and well-grounded. This is not an attempt to bring them back to church attendance. I don't believe every person needs to have a religious outlook to be a good person or live a full life. On the contrary. But I do believe our species, as a whole, needs religion – and better religion than we have now – in order to survive over our next 10 critically important generations.

It's not enough to be good

It was once thought – and not that long ago – that what was really important was that individuals lived the best life they could, pursuing their own interests while being basically kind and fundamentally decent people. This view was supported by both Protestantism and economic materialism, which grew up together. If an individual consumer/worshipper lives the best life they can, making the right choices (or having the right choices made for them, in the case of Calvinism), then they can rest easy in the judgment of their God (or their own conscience, in the case of humanism), and the world will be a good place all around.

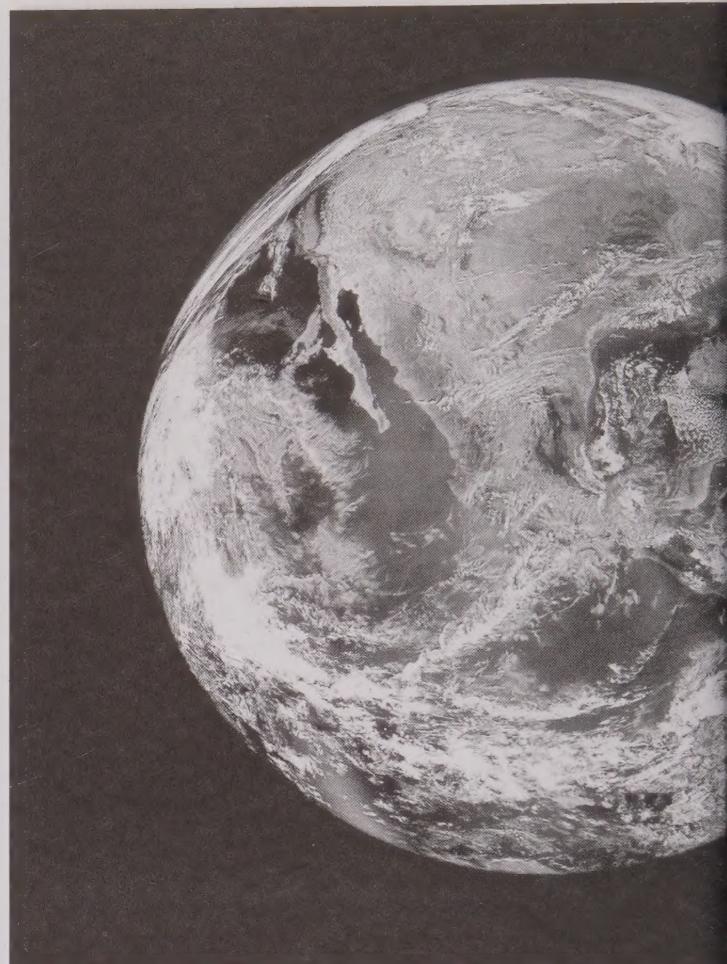
This view of life, while perfectly understandable in context, is wrong – terribly, terribly wrong. If all we do over the next 10 generations is try to live fundamentally decent lives as individuals, humanity will not survive, and not only that, as we create our own annihilation we will also take most other species with us, making the world a less beautiful, less diverse, much more barren place.

The fact is, even with all the terrible changes to our climate happening as right now, just about every person on this planet is attempting to live a fundamentally decent life. Yes, there are exceptions – including, arguably, several of the world's most powerful people. But most people aren't really all that bad. Individual self-actualisation isn't reserved to the enlightened few. Neither is basic decency and kindness. Kindness and decency are necessary to our survival as a species. They always have been – that's why they are written so firmly into our genetic code. But they are not sufficient.

The engineers at Dow Chemical and Monsanto and Exxon-Mobil are fundamentally kind, decent people. I've met a few, actually – wonderfully gentle, thoughtful types, who are at least as worried about what's happening to our planet as I am. The problem doesn't lie with them as individuals – we all spew chemicals into the atmosphere, and throw away plastics that eventually end up in the oceans. Individual behaviour is not the problem. No amount of you or I reusing our plastic bags will fix this – even though this is worth doing. The problem is a systemic failure of the collective imagination.

We need a better story

The collective imagination, like all of humanity's best tools, can be extremely dangerous. Demagogues rely on it, as do prophets. But without a serious reengagement with the collective imagination, humanity is doomed. Human beings are not merely animals that enjoy stories. We are an animal that lives our life according to the story, which is to say, the most effective and affective blossomings of the collective imagination. And the current most effective story – the story that every individual maximises their own happiness, while following the basic maxims of morality – this story is a disaster



'At the beginning of the industrial age, it was generally argued that to make a significant change. Many claimed we would be unlikely to photo'

for humanity. Not because the story is particularly evil, in itself. This story is a disaster for us, in our current context, because this story does nothing to stop, and actually greatly accelerates, the systematic destruction of our planet.

We need a better story. So, you might ask, why not look forward instead of backward? When the stories of religion are so problematic – and frequently conflict with each other – why not craft a new story?

We need religion, imagination

It's a good question. Ask it to any genuine storyteller, and she will tell you the answer. The new stories are the old stories. They build upon the old, reinvent them, revisit them. There is no such thing as a wholly new story, because no human being (and even more importantly, no intergenerational community) is a blank slate. We come from the story. If we jettison the story, we lose a major part of who we are, and become less soulful, less fully engaged, less human than we might be. It is then that the demagogues – and what are Trump and Bolsonaro and Farage and Putin, really, if not the chief prophets of individual fulfilment – take centre stage.

We need the collective imagination. We need religion. This includes literature, which is a many-fingered shoot off the branch of sacred texts. It includes rock and roll and hip-hop, fertile sprigs off the branch of sacred Gospel music. The best of the arts is, at heart, an exploration of religion.

If Hamlet isn't a tortured exposition of Arminianism, then I

od life and be a kind person



'much too big, and God too much in control, for us little humans to explore the great big world, much less conquer it!' NASA

don't know what is. Star Wars has strong Buddhist, Taoist and Christian elements, and even hired a theological consultant, Joseph Campbell. In fact, Star Wars touched such a deep vein in our society that nowadays quite a number of people self-identify as 'Jedi'; every idea of the 'Jedi faith' is really a repackaged version of one of these religions (and none the less wonderful for being so!).

Art must be more than entertainment

True art is a means of exploring the questions of the heart, of the soul – or in other words, is religion. On the other hand, the more our arts drift away from religious matters, the more the danger that they will become mere entertainment.

There are plenty of amusing divertissements out there (and this includes many of the more 'intellectual' TV shows and movies), that are fun for a while but don't have the slightest chance of changing our lives one iota. Unmoored from the stories, we are satisfied by a catchier and catchier less-and-less, until every consumer receives a personalised recommendation for their very own version of Candy Crush Soda Saga. Or whatever floats your boat.

It is up to us, collectively, to tell the stories that will save the world. These will not be new stories – not entirely new, at any rate, and not new at all when it comes to the multi-generational, collective intention (known as *tradition*) that we participate in at the deepest core of our being. But they will be new tellings, and all of our individuality, all of our unique

personality and spirit, will go into them.

Please be clear that I am not suggesting everyone believe exactly the same thing. Actually, it would be catastrophic if human diversity of thought ever winnowed down in such a manner. But – apart from a worrying modern convergence upon individualism – there is very little chance of this happening. I believe it is a dangerous myth to suppose that any human community of any real size has ever had true uniformity of belief.

Life is not about your quest for meaning

Examining the anthropological evidence, or books like *Chronicles* and the *Upanishads*, or human psychology, it is clear that in any group of people, in any era, there have been differing levels of literalism regarding the prevailing religious truths. In any community, some people take these stories more literally, while others take them more metaphorically. From the prophet Isaiah to the generations of writers known as Homer, to the prophets Dorothy Day and Mahatma Gandhi – many of the most influential voices of human history were *less* literalist, not more so. But, in their non-literalist way, they were fully and utterly engaged with sacred story. And this is important.

The current story is killing us. Don't believe it. This life we share is not mainly about your own quest for meaning. Nor is it about your own personal relationship with God. I'm not saying the current story is completely false – your spiritual journey is hugely important, as is your relationship with the divine. But this story is incomplete. And if we don't wake up from it, and craft the story better and stronger than what passes for our story now, humankind has about 10 generations left. Only a new telling of the old stories can save us now.

More than an individual journey

We'll tell this story collectively, as a species, but we begin engaging with the story as individuals and small groups. Pray. Be creative. Reflect on who you are, who you really are – not just your unique and beautiful personality, but the way the world is present to you and to your relationships.

Be in deep relationships, authentic relationships, with people and the environment and God. Tell stories. Rage. Surrender. Give it all away. Try it all out, it's important to experiment – but please, please, don't just sit there being entertained.

Don't believe life is only an individual journey when it is so, so much more than that. Believe that you are, at the very heart of you, a part of something larger than your self, something that is more important than the satisfaction of the ego.

As fun as they are, the world doesn't really need 10,000 iPhones a day. The world does need us clever monkeys to re-evaluate just what we're doing here.

And to do that, we need storytelling, we need meaning making, we need religion.

The Rev Bob Janis-Dillon is minister with the Merseyside Ministerial Partnership.



Courage calls to courage everywhere (even among young hairstylists)

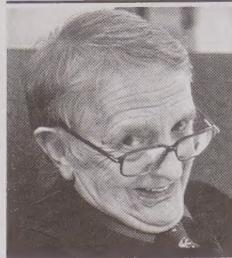
A few more backward glances to 2018, the year we celebrated the centenary of women getting the vote. Our Chief Officer Derek McAuley succeeded in drawing attention to the fact that some early suffragette campaign meetings were held in Essex Hall. Plenty of other venues refused to host them. Good news too that a statue of Millicent Fawcett was unveiled in London, the first statue of a woman to grace Parliament Square. She believed in non-violent tactics to persuade the government that women deserved the right to vote. Also welcome in early 2019 was the statue of Emmeline Pankhurst, who was by no means averse to violent tactics, as long as they were not against people. Unveiled in St. Peter's Square, hers is the first statue of a woman in Manchester except for Queen Victoria. The only twinge of disappointment is that this choice of Emmeline beat Unitarian Elizabeth Gaskell into second place. Will her turn come, someday?

The outstanding 2018 Richard Dimbleby Lecture, on women's suffrage, had a title taken from the inscription on the Millicent Fawcett statue, *Courage Calls to Courage Everywhere*. It was by author and Manchester University Professor of New Writing, Jeanette Winterson and was delivered in the Robing Room of the House of Lords. She dedicated the published version of the lecture (Canongate 2018) to her wife, psychotherapist Susie Orbach. A good read, it stresses that 'Votes for women was as much about changing the law in regard to the status of women as it was for equality at the ballot box.'

Closer to home, I was pleased to be reminded of a story from stalwart Unitarian Mair Thomas of Aberystwyth. She recalls how her grandfather, a Welsh tenant farmer and staunch supporter of votes for women, angled to get the vote for his daughter, Mair's mother. To qualify for a vote, women had to own property above a certain rateable value. She lived on the family farm but used part of the premises as a studio, where she took photographs of neighbours and friends. Her father successfully argued that she owned this portion of the farm and thus she was enabled to vote.

When I read lists of current bestsellers, I usually find I have read none of them. So, it delights me to report, at last, that top of a recent paperback best-seller list is a book I have just completed. *The Tattooist of Auschwitz* by Heather Morris, a fact-based novel, gives grim descriptions of daily life in the concentration camp. The hero Lale Sokolov survives by working for the camp guards, tattooing prisoners' numbers on their arm as they arrive, muttering apologies to each one as he does this grim work. He falls in love with an inmate but loses track of her when the Russians liberate the camp. Narrowly avoiding punishment for 'collaborating', he tracked down his lost love; they married and lived a long life happily together. The author traced him to the US, then visited Auschwitz and later Lale's hometown in Slovakia to learn more. Morris has also lectured to students about the holocaust. 'Make your own way. Live your life, but never forget the past.'

I felt a twinge of disappointment on learning that students



Funny Old World

By John Midgley

at my local further education college are to be relocated to an edge of town campus. At present their college stands nearby, a handsome building they share with the local library on High Street. It was built over 100 years ago aided by Scottish-American philanthropist Andrew Carnegie. He was a successful industrialist who gave away much of his fortune to fund projects like this one throughout the world, including around 2,500 libraries.

I visit the college regularly to enjoy a free haircut, allowing students on the hairdressing course to use my head for practice. It is a bit of a 'hit-and-miss' experience, though nothing disastrous has happened so far. On one occasion, I sat expectantly in the chair as a tutor gave some guidance to a nervous-looking young aspiring hairdresser. Then she left her to it. After a little while I realised that nothing was happening and that the student had disappeared. I waited, puzzled for about 10 minutes until the tutor came along with a pair of scissors and an awkward smile. She explained the mysterious disappearance and began cutting my hair herself. 'Sorry about that,' she said. 'The student's thrown a wobbler and is hiding in the toilet and won't come out.' Perhaps she prefers practising on an artificial head rather than mine, I thought.

It hasn't put me off using this facility. It takes me into a world I would otherwise never see, and I enjoy talking to the students about their course and employment prospects. On a recent visit I admired the row of heads along a wall, each one stuck onto an adjustable stand. Each had different coloured hair and was looking in a different direction. 'Is that real hair?' I asked. I was assured it was. 'The beards too?' 'Oh, yes.'

It was disconcerting to see one bodyless head having its hair carefully shampooed in a nearby washbasin. The plastic head didn't seem to mind as it had a permanent plastic smile on its plastic face. The student completed my haircut, slowly but without a wobble. I was pleased to learn that he is reasonably confident that he can make a career of hairdressing. I wished him well, as I do all young people trying to make their way in these troubled times.

And finally, film review time. What a delight to see *Stan and Ollie*, a remarkably authentic telling of Laurel and Hardy's last live tour of the UK and Ireland in the 1950s. Steve Coogan and John C Reilly give lifelike portrayals of the much-loved entertainers' swansong in a funny old world. We are left with immortal memories of two absurd, yet human clowns, eternally dancing. Recommended. Take hankies.

The Rev John Midgley is a retired Unitarian minister.

Opinion: Mark Price the wrong choice

By Claire MacDonald

Things have a way of generating unexpected consequences. I little thought that when I responded on Facebook recently to the news that the ex-Tory minister and Peer Lord Mark Price was to be the GA speaker this year that the exchange of views, of which mine were part, would be so revealing or so urgently felt.

Along with others, I questioned the wisdom of inviting someone who had recently been part of Theresa May's government, at this time. I was driven by something harsher – an almost visceral shock at seeing the announcement. The movement I think I am part of is surely, I have assumed, more attuned to the call to hear a wider range of voices that speak to and come from the hungry, current, complex world in which we live. And as we all know – GA is two and a half weeks after we leave the European Union. We are in the throes of some the most divisive parliamentary behaviour I have ever seen, governed by a cabinet and led by a Prime Minister whose inability to collaborate, negotiate, find common ground or even to listen has been spectacular. As a citizen I felt that this was absolutely not the right time to invite a possibly decent, but certainly partisan, Tory figure to speak to GA.

These are critical times indeed, and the issues that face us, and that touch deep into the human spirit are very, very urgent – from climate change to the rise of violent anti-Semitism and racism and the growing inequality in this country. The particular the issues we face in the UK are also entrenched in power, class, race and gender inequalities. The ferocious nature of poverty, fed by a form of corporate capitalism, has called many people, including faith leaders, to speak out. Inviting a Tory peer to talk to GA about workplace happiness does not – to me – meet the need of the times. What we need now, in order to face up to the times in which we live and in which we seek to work for change and side with love, are not the voices of the cultural centre – white, male, powerful, privileged and Conservative – but the voices of those working to make social justice happen.

I don't mean to sound a note of false urgency. I know the work of faith communities is also to tend the garden, put out the biscuits, welcome people in distress, raise money, write letters, and do the work of ordinary repair in the everyday. I don't want to be alarmist, but oh, these times, these times, these times. And in these uncertain times, when as Unitarian movement we might find ourselves called to find the tools to address the critical times in which we live – to campaign, to protest, to advocate, to witness – we have invited a former minister in the very government which has had no decent, creative, productive or just responses to the crucial issues of our time, at all.

I have no quibbles about Mark Price himself. I hear from those who know him that he is decent, that he is a Remainer, and a democrat, committed to Fair Trade and decency in business. But I wish he had said, 'Thank you friends, I do want to have a conversation with you about workplace happiness – not now, not here, let me step aside and make space for others. This is not the time for my voice to be heard.' That of course begs the question of whose voice could or should be heard, and who makes that decision and how that decision is understood.

Things have a way of generating unexpected consequences. I am realising through all of this that I do not have a clear sense of what we see as the urgent agenda of Unitarianism beyond

congregation – that is, as a sacred social movement – right now. I do see that clarity and call to action in the UUA. The United States is a country with deep internal cultural, class and race fault lines, and clashes, often real and violent ones, happen on those borders with frequency. Unitarian Universalists know they have to do the deep reflective work of finding the tools to create resilience, to speak to one another across lines and to hold to the historic work of witness, love and progressive values through direct social action.

In these last weeks I have come to wonder if we in this country have the language to build the resilient community we need to be. I think we do, but I think we are in a crisis of recognition, not quite able to see the difference between a form of liberalism that tries to be open to a range of views and to balance them, and a historically liberal religion that has a radical social sacred mission at its heart.

The consciousness-raising part of what has been expressed is, to me, to ask how we talk about this how we understand our differences and listen to one another well. And as part of that, whom do we want to invite to speak to us and how do we work with what it is we hear? I am interested in what we are doing as a movement to hone the tools we need to do the work of active critical, humane witness, and that work of finding and holding common ground with strength and an understanding of social justice.

I am wondering if we can respond to this small, useful, critical moment with a deeper conversation. A conversation that is better able to deal with turbulence, division and conflict and isn't afraid to work with it and through it. In these times I find myself present in campaigns and groups where the spiritual hunger to be fuelled and nourished for tough times ahead is really urgent and I am struck again and again by the ways in which these groups instinctively share our values, promote them and often actively embody them. That has struck me at Extinction Rebellion as much as it strikes me week on week at The Garrett Centre in Bethnal Green, where a new campaigning group *Level Up* is about to take up a tenancy, and where artists and community and cooks and kids are doing the work of nourishing the everyday and creating the fabric of shared values every day. They are making 'food' for the journey and the journey ahead is a turbulent one.

That small scale, justice seeking, community-focused world which is trying to model common ground and civil behaviour is a radical Unitarianism that stands on the shoulders of those who went before us. And it has very little in common with a world in which inviting Tory ex-ministers to the podium is unquestioned. There is no protest here in these words, it is just that we are called to question, always, and called to be present when the boat is rocking on rough seas, and at times to rock it. That is what this is about.

So let's look around us and use this as a reflective moment to ask who we are and what we side with and commit to. And let us always do that with love and thankfulness for what we have here. Let us bless this movement which is unique and extraordinary in its survival and move it.

As the poet Marge Piercy says:
What we want to change we curse and then
pick up a tool. Bless whatever you can
with eyes and hands and tongue. If you
can't bless it, get ready to make it new.

The Rev Claire MacDonald is minister with Lewisham Unitarians.

Letters to the Editor

Honour resolution and create growth committee

To the Editor:

Howard Hague (Letter, *Inquirer*, 12 January) is right. Growth and congregation support are needed, just as much – or probably more than – they were more than 10 years ago. In 2006 the Stockton congregation's Unitarian General Assembly motion was overwhelmingly accepted.

That resolution requested that the Executive Committee of the GA (EC) create a growth committee. That request still stands. There is and never has been a growth committee. The EC did not fulfil the requirement of that resolution.

Let them do it now.

Peter Whitham

Stockton-on-Tees

Lights are back on in Chatham Church

To the Editor:

I would like to thank all the congregations in the UK who contributed to our Chatham Unitarian Church refurbishment fund following on the Appeal Letter sent out last spring. We managed to raise more than £11,000 through the generous donations of other Unitarian Churches both in the UK and our partner church in the USA, as well as £1000 raised in memory of Christopher Lloyd who died in the spring, grant giving bodies and numerous individuals.

The Gregson Trust gave us an emergency grant of £1000. The Congregational and General Charitable Trust gave £2100 for the electricity repairs, Rochester Bridge Trust £2000 for the leaded porch windows, Friends of Kent Churches £1000 towards all urgent repairs, ward councillors gave £500 from their community fund. Individual donations amounted to £1,987 including £20 from Holy Angels Church Portsmouth, and those from Unitarian Churches, including £630 from our sister church in Massachusetts, came to £5,191.

A concert held in October raised £67.31; our thespian member raised £112.10 when members and friends supported the performance of *A Ghost Train* at Hazlett Theatre in Maidstone. A portion of their ticket

price came to the church. A jumble sale in November brought in almost £150. The wiring has now been repaired, including new main fuse box, fuse box for heating, sub-mains and wiring for sockets, twin sockets everywhere, cellar lights, light in the toilet, outdoor light above front door and lamp holder in vestry.

The electricity was turned back on in October. In November, the two stained-glass windows from the entry porch were repaired as recommended in the Quinquennial Report

There still remains much to be done to bring the building up to a modern standard and we are grateful to the generosity of our congregations and supporters, which has enabled us to worship in light and warmth once again.

(Mrs) Beryl Payne

Chatham Unitarian Church

Prayer's effectiveness is a settled question

To the Editor:

I was surprised to read Jim Corrigan's article debating the effectiveness of prayer (*Inquirer*, 12 January).

This has already been proved by the University of San Francisco School of Medicine in scientifically controlled tests on patients in a coronary care unit. The patients who were prayed for had significantly better outcomes than those who were not prayed for.

You can read about this in the Southern Medical Journal dated 01 Jul 1988, at europepmc.org/abstract/med/3393937.

Michael Robinson

Dublin Unitarian Church

Narcissism can be a force for good

To the Editor:

Thank you for Iain Brown's rich and stimulating article on psychopaths. (*Inquirer*, 26 January) I would never want to defend psychopathic behaviour but may I put in a plea for the value of narcissism – that is, of wanting a reasonable degree of credit and respect for what one can do or be?

Charles Darwin, so universally admired, was panicked into publishing 'The Origin of Species' when it looked as if Wallace might beat him to the

winning post and get the credit for the theory we call 'Darwinism'. And in every case of original thought or cultural creation we surely need to know and value the individual human source.

Could it be that psychology, purporting to be a science but importing value judgements by the use of loaded words such as 'narcissism', is caught in an unresolved contradiction between ethics and scientific objectivism?

Christine Avery
Plymouth Unitarians

Life certainly continues after this one

To the Editor:

John Watson (*Inquirer*, 12 January) asks 'do our lives continue after death?' Yes, they do. Read *Life After Life* by Dr Raymond Moody, *The Wisdom of Near-Death Experiences* by Dr Penny Sartori, *Testimony of Light* by Helen Greaves. See the Rev Sheena Gabriel's afterlife article (*Inquirer*, 20 October) Explore afterlife at the Churches Fellowship for Psychical and Spiritual Studies on the web at: www.churchesfellowship.co.uk

Susan Highwood
Friend of Hastings Unitarians

Inquirer letters policy

Letters should be succinct. It is preferable that they are sent by email to inquirer@btinternet.com. Typewritten or legible handwritten submissions may be sent to the editor at 46A Newmarket Road, Cringleford, Norwich NR4 6UF. Letters should be signed with the writer's full name and, if applicable, the name of the group or congregation with which the writer is affiliated. A postal address and telephone number are required, for verification purposes.

Letters will be edited for length and content and may appear in an excerpted form. Any affiliations listed with letter writers' names are for identification purposes only.



GA ANNUAL MEETINGS

Birmingham Hilton Metropole

16-18 April 2019

Book your place at www.unitarianmeetings2019.com
Booking deadline: 26 February (to avoid late booking fee)



Join hundreds of Unitarians from across Britain for three days of worship, socialising, learning, relaxation, and shaping our future.



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Calling Unitarian Philatelists and Historians

For auction: historic postage stamp, issued in 2018. Hungarian 450 Forint commemorative postage stamp, issued 2 May 2018. Has the famous picture of the Diet of Torda, a historic event in Transylvanian Unitarian history, an oil painting by Aladár Körösfői-Kriesch. (Photo right)

The stamp is Franked Budapest 17 December 2018 (the 450th anniversary year) on an envelope with a coloured line drawing of the interior of the Budapest Unitarian Church. Proceeds will go to the Send a Child to Hucklow Fund, a children's holiday scheme based at the Nightingale Centre, Great Hucklow. Bids (in GBP) should be sent by email to johnmidgley60@hotmail.com. Auction closes at midnight on 28 February 2019.



New Unity starts £1.7 million refurbishment

New Unity, the Unitarian meeting house at Newington Green, London, has been emptied of its furniture and fittings in preparation for a refurbishment and grand re-opening in 2020.

The congregation was awarded a Heritage Lottery grant totalling £1.73 million to bring the deteriorating building back to life and make it accessible to all. In addition to being a home to dissenters since 1708, the meeting house is well known as a home to radical thought, particularly in the 18th century when Dr Richard Price led the congregation. Mary Wollstonecraft, credited with many as the founder of feminism, attended while Price was minister, leading to a designation of the meeting house as the birthplace of feminism.

The dissenters who worshipped there also campaigned for religious freedom, the abolition of slavery, and social reform. It was frequently visited by several Founding Fathers of the USA, including Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson and Thomas Paine.

The New Unity congregation plans to refurbish the building and create a centre for, 'exploring and celebrating the history and modern relevance of rational dissent and the foundations of feminism'. In 2016 the building was placed on a register of at-risk buildings by Historic England, opening the way for the Heritage Lottery Grant.

The plans go beyond creating a better worship space.

'We want to share this vital history with a wider audience: schoolchildren, local community groups and interested parties from further afield', explains John Bates, chair of the team that submitted the National Lottery bid. 'We'll be adding a visitor centre, creating disabled access, and generally future-proofing the building, so it can serve generations to come. We're immensely grateful to the National Lottery for enabling this to happen'.

While the church is shut during 2019, services and other activities will take place at Newington Green Primary School.

Hucklow Summer School 2019

For Personal and Leadership Development

'Theology in the Flesh'

How Might our Embodied Experience Shape our Answers to Life's Ultimate Questions?



17th to 24th August 2019

The Nightingale Centre, Great Hucklow, Derbyshire

Applications due by 5th April 2019

Allocation of places will be confirmed in May 2019

Hucklow Summer School: Part of the GA of Unitarian and Free Christian Churches, Registered Charity: No. 250788

Hucklow Summer School brings fellow Unitarians together and allows them to get to know each other deeply and form lasting connections. The core purpose of summer school week is religious education: we focus on matters of religion and spirituality and intend to draw out and develop the potential of all participants. We aim to provide a carefully balanced programme, offering a rich mix of activities for both the heart and head, and a wide variety of optional sessions including country walks, poetry, discussions and crafts, which participants might 'take home' and try out in their own congregations and communities. We also ensure that there are plenty of opportunities for relaxed fellowship and fun during the week!

Theme Talks: with Winnie Gordon, Eleanor Chiari, Robin Hanford, Jen Hazel, and Bob Janis-Dillon.

A Choice of Daily Engagement Groups:

'Sex and the Spirit'

with John Harley and Mark Stewart

'Let Your Body Call You Home'

with Sheena Gabriel and Catherine Coyne

'The Beliefs That Ground Us'

with Celia Cartwright and Sue Woolley

'Sacred the Body'

with Sarah Tinker and Danny Crosby

Children and Young People's Programme

with Claire Maddocks and Jim Blair

Basic Cost for Adults (shared room): £550

Some bursaries are available to help with the cost of attending – we would appreciate it if you would get in touch ASAP for further funding advice.

Please visit our website for further details and an application form:

www.hucklowsummerschool.co.uk

Alternatively, please telephone Louise Baumberg on 01483 537206.